Somebody stop me!

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

When you devise a cartoon with a view to merchandising toy action figures to kids it's not a huge leap to branch out into video games too. Gremlin certainly saw the potential for a lucrative money-spinning opportunity when they teamed up with Kenner (of Star Wars fame) in 1987 to produce a hat trick of titles based on the virtuous crime-fighting animated TV series, MASK. Note the capitals, it's an acronym you see, folks. One belonging to the 'Mobile Armored Strike Kommand' underground task force in fact, yet craftily also an allusion to the stars of the show wearing supercharged face masks to confer special powers, and anonymity. When you're battling against the might of warmongering, terrorist, serpentine acronyms you need all the help you can get. Enter 'VENOM'; *all* cartoon baddies are evil, that goes without saying, so this canaille of miscreants must be *really* nasty if it says so on their business cards.

'Vicious Evil Network of Mayhem', it's right there up front. How would they explain *that* going through airport customs?

Well, they're not the brightest LED on the toy car dashboard, that's for sure, though this, of course, allowed Kenner to stage an ongoing skirmish between good and - what's the word? - spanning four series between 1985 and 1988. For the third and fourth seasons, the show lost its way, morphing into a bizarre blend of Transformers and The Fast and the Furious, long before the latter franchise existed.

I must say it's awfully handy that all the naughtiness in the world is perpetrated by this one rabble of deviants because it means that as soon as we've wiped them out... Utopia! If only the real world was like that. Although, would that leave a vacuum for a certain follically challenged dictator to fill the void? Maybe we should be careful what we wish for.

There was no subtle pretence; from the outset, Kenner intended the cartoon to be one long extended commercial to push the toys into kids' consciousness (and Christmas wish lists), and therefore also their parents' shopping baskets. Thus they centred around young, fit, action heroes and their seemingly ordinary vehicles that magically transform into armoured combat contraptions. Incidentally, Kenner went on to manufacture Transformers toys for Hasbro following their successful takeover bid in 1991, merging their respective lines under the umbrella of the new parent company.

Nurturing the notion that *you* too could grow up to be a superhero, the altruistic, clandestine anti-crime teamwork conventional jobs during the daytime, saving the world in their *spare* time... or in fact whenever they received the equivalent of the Bat-Signal via their digital wristwatches. They must have very understanding bosses! Then I'm sure it was all squared away with the 'Peaceful Nations Alliance' who they report to.

> "Masked crusaders, working overtime Fighting crime, fighting crime Secret raiders who will neutralise As soon

> as they arrive, at the site Trakker's gonna lead the mission And Spectrum's got such super vision M-M-M-M-MASK! Is the mighty power that can save the day M-M-M-M-MASK! No one knows what lies behind the masquerades M-M-M-M-MASK! Always riding hot on VENOM's trail Come see the laser rays Fire away"

Theme tune lyrics firmly ear-wormed, let's take a look at the 8-bit game for the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad courtesy of Gremlin Graphics. Appropriately it opens with an accurate rendition of the same music thanks to our old pal, audio guru Ben Dalglish. Unfortunately that's the only music you'll hear for the entire game.

As for the remainder of the development credits, the lineup looks much like this...

Game concept: Tony R. Porter, Kevin Bulmer, Stuart Gregg
Programming: Tony R. Porter
Graphics: Kevin Bulmer, Terry Lloyd
Sound FX: Tony R. Porter

> "So often licensed games of this sort are just a name, a lot of cash up front to some merchandising outfit and a badly copied picture of the real thing on the cassette inlay. It's nice to see that Gremlin haven't let that attitude get in the way of their ability to consistently produce good games. So, even if you're not a slipper-slinging, watch-wearing MASK fan reserve a space in your stocking for it."
>
> **70% - Commodore User (December 1987)**

VENOM, up to their old tricks again have detonated a bomb at MASK's Boulder Hill headquarters, opening up a space-time vortex that has swallowed up seven members of the crew, scattering them between various junctures throughout time.

Adopting the role of Bruce Wayne, sorry, I mean Matt 'Hunter' Trakker - multi-millionaire, philanthropic founder and leader of the organisation - it's your duty to rescue your colleagues. MASK being aimed squarely at future petrol-heads, we achieve this driving our nippy red Chevy Camaro 'Thunderhawk' sports car, gull-wings activated in jet fighter mode of course because that's *double* cool. I expect you'll find the controls are sufficiently responsive, yet inertia initially makes it trickier to steer precisely. I'm sure you'll get the hang of it soon enough.

Two of our fellow agents were sent hurtling back into the prehistoric era, two into the distant future, another two wound up at VENOM's base, while the remaining comrade managed to sidestep the whole charade by hiding in the vicinity of MASK's Boulder Hill des-res. Sadly none of the dubious racial stereotypes the show was notorious for put in even a glancing cameo, so gamers were deprived of the opportunity to learn how to knock up a Chicken Jalfrezi with Kandukur immigrant, Ali 'Lightning' Bombay, practice the call of the wild with native American, Nevada 'Chief' Rushmore, or reassemble a set of Matryoshka dolls under the guidance of fur-wearing beardy Russian, Boris 'The Czar' Bushkin.

Falling into the top-down, eight-way shooter genre, the game is split across four levels, each tasking you with much the same goal, albeit taking place in contrasting environments, pitted against theme-appropriate assailants.

Your first objective is to track down four colour-coded fragments of a key. Once assembled they form a letter, which when pressed on the keyboard activates a navigational GPS scanner. Equipment up and running you receive helpful indications as to the direction in which to travel to locate your dudes in distress. Each of the opposing factions comprises a single, token *damsel*, yet neither of them feature in the game.

Your planet-policing posse aren't going to be much use to you without their mystical mega-masks, and as these were separated from their owners when they were so rudely deported, they'll have to be tracked down first, along with your own. Curiously each is personified by Christening them with a name, the simple act of wearing them turned into a major event... "Backlash mask on!", "Gator mask fire!", "Penetrator Mask, On"... you get the idea.

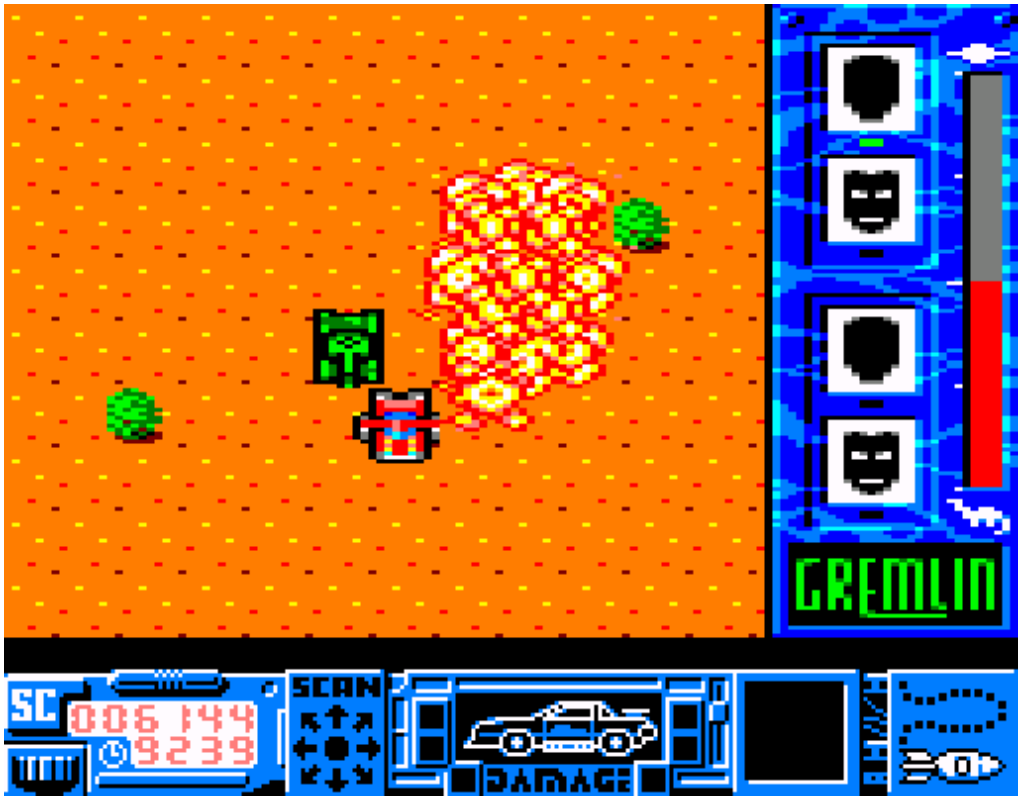
With the crew reunited, racing against the clock you must proceed to the enemy base and destroy it to ensure the salvation of the human race, or at least preserve a duck pond, or whatever the current eco-plot entails. You know, the usual mullarkey. You're graced with infinite lives, restarting from scratch whenever you die, nevertheless it's game over for keeps should your time run out.

> "Ignoring any connections with toys or TV shows, MASK as a game provides quite a decent challenge, and is surprisingly entertaining. Admittedly, the game's theme is fairly simple, but it still managed to keep me enthralled for some time. The mixture of blasting, exploring and collecting puzzle pieces is captivating, and the gameplay is varied enough to actually justify its pursuance – something that can hardly be said of many of the recent tie-ins.

Control of Matt's car is quite convincing as it careers around the screen, although this can make parts of the landscape a little difficult to negotiate. Otherwise, the whole game feels fairly polished and can be considered a moderately worthy purchase.

An average toy conversion, with just enough gameplay to make it worthwhile."

63% - Zzap! (January 1988)



"Games based on popular toys have never really worked before - Transformers and Challenge Of The Gobots were letdowns - but MASK 1 looks like it'll put all that right with a very involved puzzle/shoot-'em-up game. It's well-designed, well-executed and immensely playable, and has enough action to prevent it from becoming too much of a cerebral exercise. Controlling Thunderhawk may be frustrating at first, but when the inertia effect has been

overcome it's positively useful (especially when dodging the falling rocks on Boulder Hill). MASK 1 is a game to spend time over and work at - definitely no one-minute wonder."

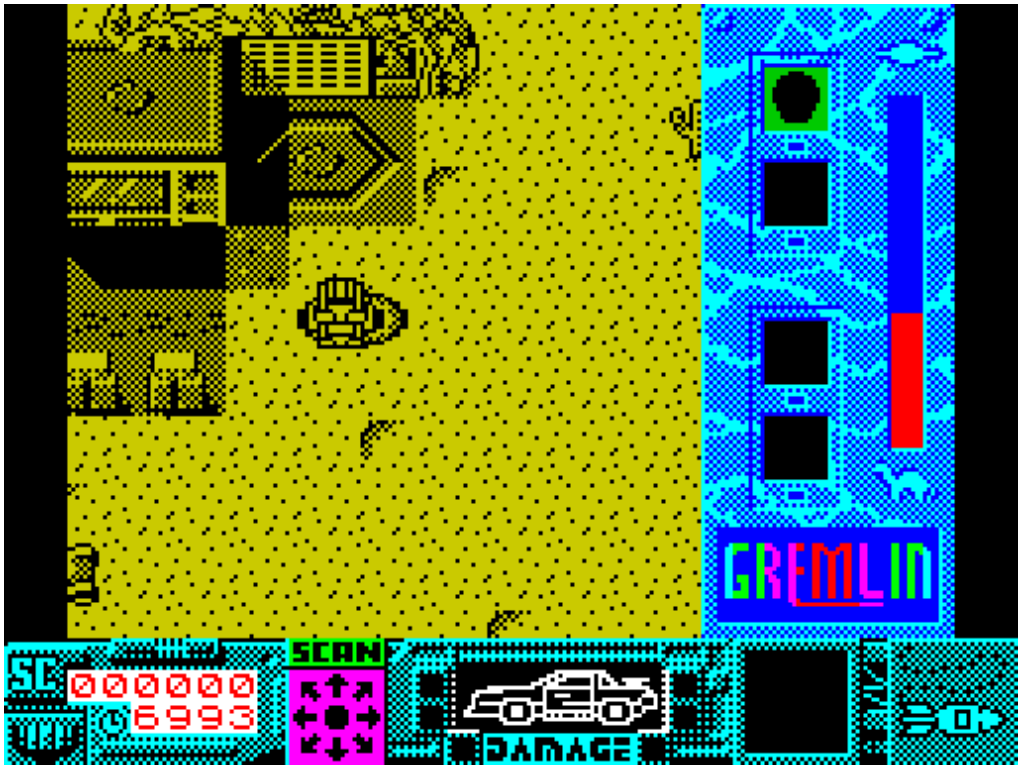
85% - Crash issue 45, Ricky (October 1987)

Your assault vehicle comes equipped with front-firing retractable wing cannons that shoot duel, round, blue ballistics, though you can also collect and carry up to three stun bombs. Very effective they are too, especially if suicide is playing on your mind. If not it's wise to light the fuse and then scoot clear before they detonate; just wait and see what happens to your damage-o-metre if you don't.

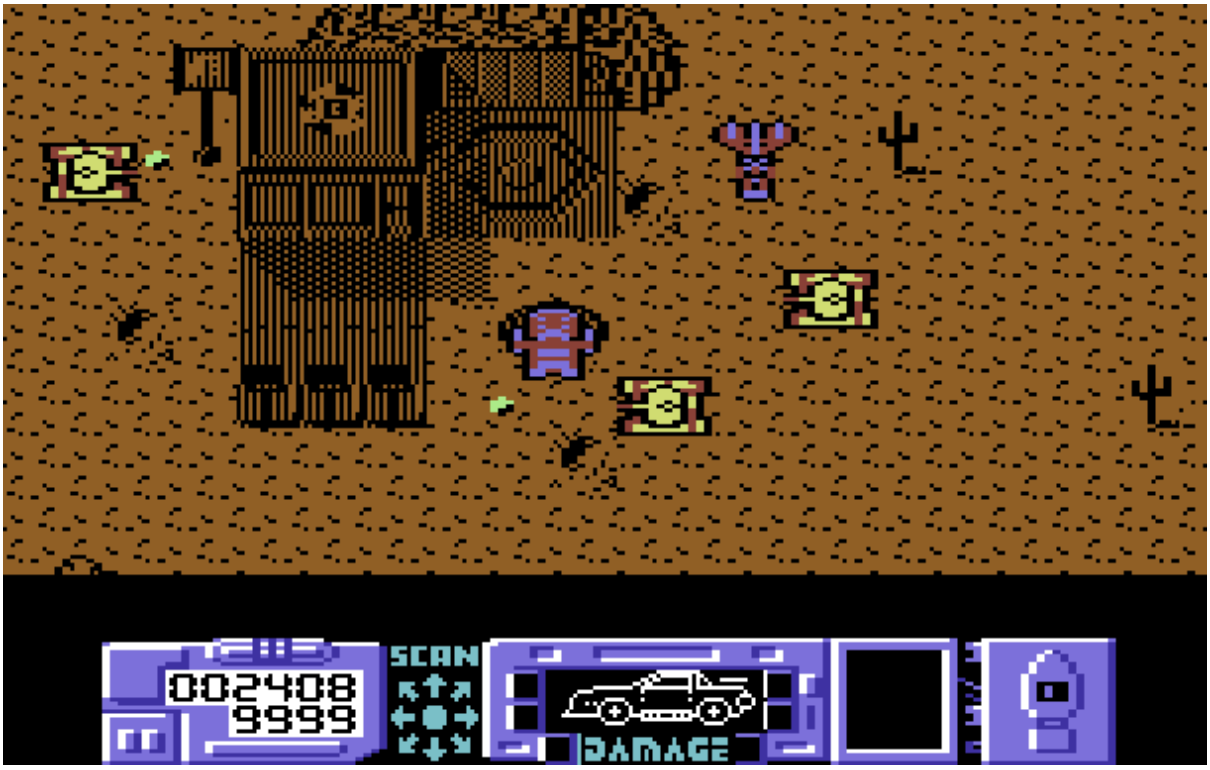
Your vehicle's current condition is represented by the red blocks framing your Thunderhawk in the HUD, and can be reversed by collecting repair boxes. The coordinates of these tool kits, along with keys, bombs, and the whereabouts of

your evictee chums cycles randomly to make each new game unique, thereby enhancing the replayability factor.

> "There's something for everyone in MASK. It's one of those games that employs elements of shooties, thinkies, arcadies - you name it, it's there. And far from being overly complicated, it's all really accessible and highly addictive.
>
> By far the hardest part is assembling the security key, which is what really lifts MASK out of the ordinary.
>
> The only blackish mark on MASK character is I'm sure some people will quickly get bored with being unable to assemble that key, and may decide MASK is just too complex to bother with.
>
> Hopefully though, there aren't too many who'll think like that because, if MASK is one thing, it's definitely well worth persevering with.
>
> Jam-packed with puzzles to solve and enemies to destroy. Needs patience, perseverance, and more than a little luck!"
>
> **90% - Sinclair User issue 68 (November 1987)**



Level 1 gets underway as you recover from the fallout of VENOM's bomb blitz. Your first mission is to rescue Bruce 'Magic' Sato, toymaker by day, mechanical engineer and eastern philosophy waffle merchant by night. In doing so you invoke the wrath of Miles 'Wolf' Mayhem - founder of VENOM, terrorist, arms dealer and general criminal scumbag - who circles above in his Switchblade chopper pelting you with machine gun pods and missiles. Ironically, Miles was also the co-founder of MASK, only killing your partner's brother and pilfering half of the Mighty Masks of Benevolence has a tendency to sour a relationship, and thus Matt and Miles disunited.



Other threats to your well-being in this arid desert locale include tanks, gun emplacements, the Stringray tank belonging to Bruno 'Mad Dog' Sheppard, and a Vampire-propelled Floyd 'Birdman' Malloy.

Midway through the level, you encounter a rubble impasse that must be blown up to reveal a tunnel under the railway leading to the remainder of the level. When our work here is done we exit through a time portal.

MASK

"Graphically MASK 1 is very good, with a horde of nasty VENOM baddies chasing our hapless hero around a solid, colourful screen. Sound, though, consists of the usual bangs and crashes, and control is quite fiddly - but the game's addictiveness keeps you playing."

87% - Crash issue 45, Mark (October 1987)

For the next course, VENOM serves up a visit to the Land Before Time starring pterodactyls, snapping turtles, and Little Shop of Horrors-esque man-eating plants. Navigating around ferocious erupting volcanos, nudging colossal boulders to forge a clearing, the aim is to rescue two of your compatriots. More specifically, British computer and communications expert, veterinarian, zoologist, and exotic pet store owner, Alex 'Megabyte' Sector, along with Canadian lumberjack, carpenter, natural disasters and martial arts expert and monster truck driver, Jacques 'Trailblazer' LaFleur.

> "MASK 1 certainly has the graphical appeal of a successful game, but it's too tedious to keep you interested - most of the time is spent trying get hold of a very uncontrollable car. The layered graphics give as strong a feeling of 3-D as possible, but the lack of colour detracts from the atmosphere of the different eras. Though MASK 1 stands out from the others of its genre, mainly because of the graphics, it lacks the edge of appeal."
>
> **70% - Crash issue 45, Paul (October 1987)**

Hurtling headlong into the future without a Delorean in sight we visit a space-age setting populated by spaceships, immense UFOs, and green blobs, freshly barfed out from their bubbling slime pits. A looming futuristic base occupies the bulk of the environment, ring-fenced by a high-tech monorail track you must breach to progress.

Here the challenge is to rescue Latino Ph.D physician, language and cryptography expert, Julio 'Doc' Lopez, along with Buddie 'Clutch' Hawks, auto mechanic and station attendant, intelligence expert and master of disguise.

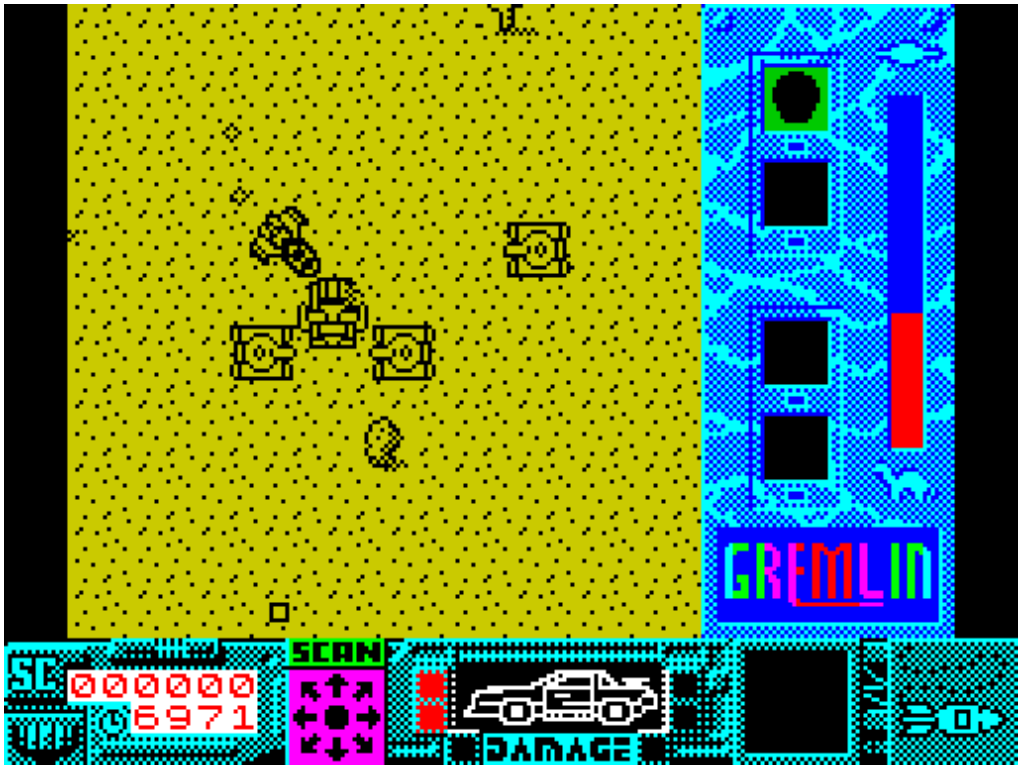
> "Smooth multi-directional scrolling adds to the high standard of graphics, which are colourful and well animated. Gremlin have found that happy medium in this game which allows plenty of background detail without cluttering up the screen or making things difficult to see. Mask is action-packed and full of excitement with plenty to keep you busy for a long time - or at least until Mask 2 comes out."
>
> **87% - ACE, Amstrad version (October 1987)**

VENOM's forest base defended by laser turrets is the setting for the final battle. Not the most welcoming resort on the planet sadly as it's crawling with mammoth spiders and ants that make a sport of surfacing from their burrows to stalk and torment you. Fire-breathing, subterranean snakes emerge from the scorched earth much like Graboids from Tremors, while Mayhem's Switchblade helicopter and VENOM tanks are back with a vengeance.

In need of our help here are pizza cook and delivery man, scuba diver, boat and off-road driving aficionado, Dusty 'Powderkeg' Hayes, and Matt's adopted 10-year-old son, Scott, mechanical and computer wizard, and elementary school student. Scott, too young to be an *official* agent, doesn't possess a mask so instead we must recover his cowardly, wisecracking sidekick, T-Bob; an R2D2 rip-off who doubles up as a moped, communication and tracking system.

"Another nice scenario, but once again control of your tank is less than smooth, and the massive number of opposing tanks and aeroplanes - all out to get you with an admirable single-mindedness - changes what could have been an interesting challenge to a mere shoot-'em-up with knobs on. There's little to keep you going, so not surprisingly you stop. Not one of Gremlin's best."

54% - Your Sinclair issue 48 (December 1989)



Reaching the nucleus of evil - the turncoat's base - our crowning hurdle is to rig it with two explosive charges, blowing it sky-high, annihilating VENOM in the process.

We close with a static epilogue screen depicting Scott waking from a disturbing nightmare. Yep, you guessed it, none of this really happened, thus VENOM are still out there infecting the planet like a virulent plague. Knowing MASK the game spawned two sequels, that was pretty much on the cards from the outset. Oh well, once more unto the breach.

"I'd have been happier if the game had been zappier. As an arcade game it's not too hot. The controls feel a bit sluggish, to say the least, and the actual gameplay soon gets rather tedious.

Having said that, I have no doubt whatsoever that this will sell well, simply because there are enough MASK fanatics out there to ensure high sales. But if you aren't a MASK follower, then I'd think twice about picking up this one. There are plenty of better arcade games, and the licensing deal alone doesn't make it worth it.

Disappointing cartoon tie-in that's too slow to provide long term zapping. Wait for MASK 2!"

60% - Your Sinclair issue 24 (December 1987)

"I despaired of seeing a good cartoon/toy licensed conversion when US Gold released its overhyped He-Man games. Thankfully, with this release of Mask, I wasn't in

despair town long. A great cartoon and a very good game."

80% - C&VG, Amstrad version (October 1987)

In honour of the cartoon's redundantly didactic public safety awareness bulletin finale sequences, I'll leave you with some judicious advice. *Never* play with matches, *don't* stick a fork in the toaster, *always* use a roadside phone box when stranded, *never* cry wolf unless there's a real emergency, and *always* wear a safety helmet when you ride a bike. There, *now* you can't say you haven't learnt something new today.